

BHARAT MILAP

FROM THE TAMIL RAMAYANA OF KAMBAN

*Broadcast from the Madras Station of
All India Radio in July and August 1954*

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THE PUBLICATIONS DIVISION
MINISTRY OF INFORMATION AND BROADCASTING
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

May 1955

891.262
k 15 B

17057

Price: 8 annas, or 1 shilling, 15 cents

FOREWORD

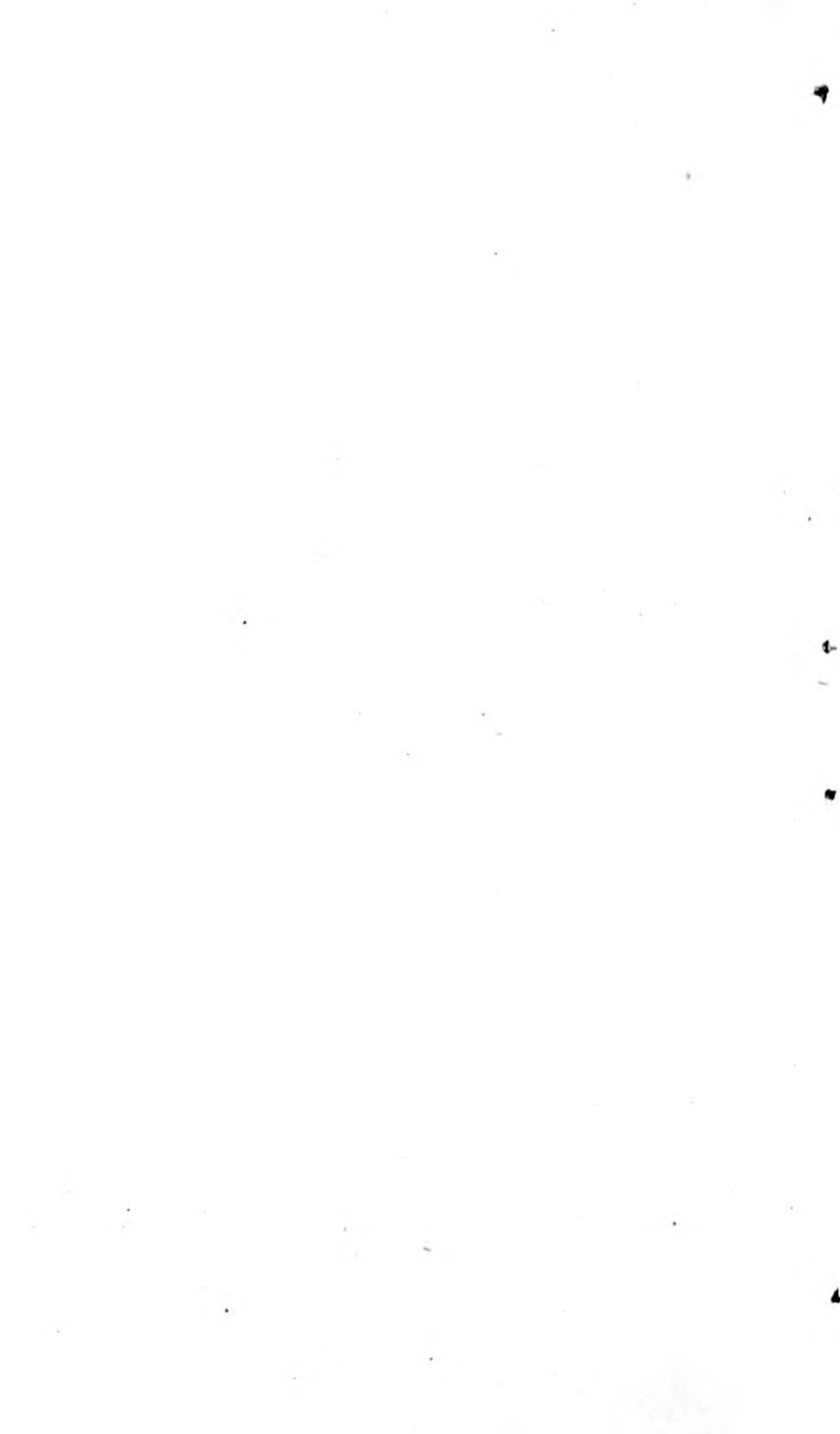
Kamban, like Tulsidas, was a Bhakta first and a poet next. No wonder that devotion and piety suffused and permeated his entire work. His poetry is no less attractive. Like Tulsidas, Kamban also seems to have reached the acme of pathos in *Ayodhya Kand*. Rajaji has brought out some of that sublime pathos in his beautiful translation. I have never been able to read *Ayodhya Kand* of Tulsi's Ramayana without tears and Rajaji's translation of Kamban in verse has been equally remarkable.

For one familiar with Tulsidas, it is easy to appreciate the charm, the beauty and sublimity and the life-giving devotion of Kamban, and Rajaji has done a great service by making some portions of that immortal work known to non-Tamilians. Somewhere Tulsidas has said that Rama's name is greater even than Rama himself. It is equally true that Tulsidas and Kamban are greater even than Valmiki. Tulsidas says that Rama incarnate was able to give salvation to but a few but his name remembered and repeated has been the salvation of numberless saints and sinners, and will continue to be so till the end of time. Even so, Valmiki brought Rama home only to those who study and know Sanskrit which, as its very name implies, is the language of the cultured few. Kamban touches the heart and ennobles the mind even of the unlettered. It will be doing a great service if someone were able to render Kamban into Hindi verse and Tulsidas into Tamil verse.

Reading the present translation I felt in many places as if I was reading Tulsidas. The thought, even the expression, was not only similar but the same, although in places the story might have differed. Therein lies India's unity in diversity, hidden but persistent and everlasting.

22nd April, 1955

Rajendra Prasad



I

The difference between Valmiki and Kamban, or between Valmiki and Tulasidas, is that with the later poet Rama is God at every turn, while in Valmiki though Rama is undoubtedly recognised as an incarnation of Vishnu, yet the treatment of character and incident throughout is only as of a good and valiant prince, and the God-hood is forgotten as it were. By the time Kamban and Tulasi came to sing the Ramayana, Rama had become God Himself and so completely deified for generations with temple and rituals dedicated to His worship that it would have been wholly artificial for Kamban or Tulasi to do as Valmiki did and to tell the story of Rama as just a heroic romance. The men, women and children who were to hear Kamban knew Rama only as God incarnate.

To try to undo the work of ages and to undeify Rama and Krishna in India would be as futile as positively mischievous. In them are rooted our whole living culture, a culture of which we may be proud. We cannot cut off a vital organ and hope to live. Deceived by the glamour of the superstructures let us not shake the foundations of rough-hewn granite on which the house we live in rests. It would be disastrous. India cannot be India without Rama and Krishna.

It may be easy and even more satisfactory to tell the Ramayana in English or French as a story of the Imperial Prince of Ayodhya rather than that of God come down on earth. Such a presentation may read well in the foreign medium. Not so if we tell the story in any of the mother-tongues of the children of India. Imagine re-writing the Bible and converting it into the story of a good and pious young man who obtained a large following by his simple approach to religion, but who was sentenced to death by the official judge at the instance of a jealous group of interested priests of whose disloyalty a weak central government was living in continuous fear. The story would be interesting enough and have its lessons, but it would not be the foundation of Christianity such as it now is as the story of the Son

of God come down to bring the message of compassion and grace to mankind. What might suit a foreign medium would be disastrously inadequate for the people whom the idyll has nursed and sustained for ages as a story of direct divine interest in the affairs of men and as a rock on which their higher life firmly rests. Kamban lived in the times of our Alwars and was one of them, and he sang the story of Rama as God come down on earth to suffer, chasten, uplift, help and guide men. And he has found an honoured place among the great Bhaktas.

Apart from this difference in the treatment of the hero, there is considerable difference in poetic form between Valmiki and Kamban. Kamban's Ramayana is a lyric, while Valmiki's is an epic. The lyric is a string of cut-gems with glittering facets sparkling at each turn. It is not a solemn march of pre-destined sadness as is Valmiki's epic. The lyric sparkle of Kamban and Tulasi goes well with their constant reminder that Rama is the Supreme Being Himself.

The unique characteristic of Tamil verse is the initial rhyme. In good Tamil poetry, unlike the end-rhyme in English or Hindustani, it is not just a purposeless jingle that has become a custom. The initial rhyme in Tamil is a medium of emphasis and climax and it is a remarkably efficient medium. So also the alliteration, which is also an essential in Tamil verse, is not merely an idle sound-repetition but actively aids the enforcement of the thought and imagery contained in the verses. Of course these aids are of no value in unskilled hands and become just jingles. But in Kamban's art, the alliteration is subdued with great care and the rhyme words always go up with mounting quality and are never allowed to deteriorate into a laboured selection out of a thesaurus. They come with a clasp of appropriateness on the top of an ascending scale. This quality among many other things distinguishes Kamban from the inferior Tamil poets. The lyric cannot be a lyric without conspicuous economy of words, without sparkle and lilt, and these are Kamban's special characteristics not to speak of the depth of his thoughts, his human understanding and his wonderful poetic imagination.

I cannot in an English rendering bring out the rhyme or the sparkle or the lilt. I can only attempt to do some justice to the wealth of substance and brevity of presentment. The

rendering is almost literal. It may help non-Tamil listeners to have some idea of the quality of Kamban of whom the Tamil people are so justly proud.

The sage Visvamitra presents the Prince of Ayodhya to Janaka, the illustrious philosopher-king, and informs him of his desire that Rama should see the reputed bow of Siva. It was well known that Janaka had sworn to give his daughter away in marriage only to one who bent and strung that bow.

Said the great King to Visvamitra
 "My thoughts do run before my words
 Oft have I said to myself
 Seeing Sita languishing
 In fasts and holy vows
 I fear this bow may prove
 Stronger than my star
 And end my life in grief.
 May be this prince of yours
 May bend and string this bow—
 Whereat so many a prince
 Has tried and failed before—
 And from this sea of grief
 May lift me up to shore."

"Go", said the King to the waiting men
 "Bring the ancient bow at once
 And place it before this noble prince."
 "Aye ! our liege" they said
 And four of them, they sped
 To where the sacred bow
 Was kept enshrined.

Dark-haired mammoth men
 With heavy locks o'er hanging
 Shoulders shaped like granite boulders
 They carried the ancient bow
 Whose secret weight confounded
 And made them halt for breath
 Many a time.

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Earth was glad
 There was a shift
 Of the weight on her back.
 The great mountain of the North
 Felt an uneasy rivalry.
 World-space felt narrow
 When ocean-like the crowds
 With tumultuous noise
 Came to watch
 This trial at the mystic bow.

“Is this Mount Meru shaped into a bow
 Meru with which the gods did churn
 The ocean once upon a time?
 Or is it the Serpent god
 On whose head rests the Earth
 Or is it the far off rainbow of heaven
 Come down to earth in solid form?”

“Should a maiden’s fate be hung on this?
 Can any prince be ever found
 To lift and bend this formidable thing,
 Unless indeed a miracle be worked?
 Alas, for the girl
 Tied to this impossible pledge.”

When thus the maidens talked annoyed
 They placed the heavy bow on the ground
 Which many a noble prince had scanned
 And threw up his hands in utter despair,
 So many saw but none did dare.

The King, he looked at the stalwart form
 Of the beautiful prince from great Ayodhya
 But then he looked at the terrible bow
 Which seemed to hold his destined grief
 And sadly he thought of his pledge-bound girl.

The King’s good priest Sadanand spoke

Who understood his sovereign's grief:
 "The Goddess Earth's resplendent form
 Lies concealed from the eyes of men;
 Her glory is seen in the golden harvest
 That issues from the good plough-share.
 But when our King he cut a furrow
 In the holy field, Earth herself
 Appeared as a child in golden glory;
 And ocean's child Lakshmi herself
 Twin companion of the drink of gods
 Yields honoured place to our princess here
 Sita of resplendent beauty."

Visvamitra made a sign
 Whereat like the impetuous flame
 That from the sacrificial fire
 Rises to meet the falling *ghee*
 Rama rose, and the gods above
 Shouted in joy and the *rishis* below
 Eagerly uttered benediction.

The charming prince he stood erect
 But then before he reached the bow
 That his holy guide desired him bend
 The god of love he bent his bow
 And a thousand shafts did pierce the hearts
 Of a thousand maidens there assembled.

"Look at this bow intervening,
 It is hard on this prince and on the maid,"
 Said one,
 "If our bashful Sita's beautiful hand
 Should fail to win the loving grasp
 Of this fair prince's broad brave hand
 What is left for poor Sita's heart
 But joyless years
 To pine and die?"
 Said another,

"If the King he wishes his girl to wed,
 And such a prince has come to ask,
 "Yes" should be the single word
 And hands that instant sweetly joined.
 Instead he's planned his own undoing
 Foolishly placing this ancient bow
 Between the princess and her joy."

While the maids thus whispered anxious words
 The prince advanced with stately stride
 More majestic than the steps of a lion
 Or a coronation elephant.
 Assembled elders chanted benisons
 And the gods above that knew they cheered.

The bow forbidding was there out-stretched
 Like a great mountain lying flat;
 The prince extended he his hand
 And seized it well.
 Wonder of wonders !
 Is it the bow indeed
 Or is't a wreath of fragrant flowers,
 He has so lightly raised
 To put round Sita's neck?

They watched unwinking but could not tell
 When he placed the bow
 Firm against his foot,
 Or when he strung it true and pulled.
 They saw the prince he held it well,
 They heard the thunder
 Of its breaking !

The gods acclaimed and showered flowers
 And from the clouds fell golden rain ;
 The sea of thronging men they threw
 Pearls and gems on the valiant prince ;
 Assembled holy men they blessed
 The King in his hour of greatest joy.

II

Rama and Sita are in the forest. They found themselves remarkably happy in the hut that adept Lakshmana built for them. The surroundings were beautiful and they so enjoyed the peace and beauty of forest life that they had no regrets for what they had left behind in Ayodhya, except that now and then Rama thought of his father and his heart sank. "I have done all I could to save his honour but how can I take away his great grief?" This thought was a telepathic reaction to what was then actually happening in Ayodhya.

Both Valmiki and Kamban leave the princes and Sita at this stage and go back to Ayodhya. Fast-going messengers were sent to Bharata. And Bharata received them and in response to the urgent call that the messengers conveyed, he left for Ayodhya not knowing what was waiting for him there. Then follow some of the tensest situations in the Ramayana. What can approach the exquisite pathos of the situation where the most innocent of men Bharata, has become the motive for the most cruel among wicked deeds ever recorded, *viz.*, the banishment of Rama, beloved of all, to the forests of Dandaka? Bharata's meeting his mother Kaikeyi and the scene where the doubly-bereaved Kausalya, mother of Rama, receives Bharata at first with natural suspicion and a sense of distance, and then seeing his utter innocence completely breaks down—these scenes are painted with unrivalled beauty by Kamban.

The messengers carried the message
They went by the shortest route.
Day and night,
As fast as they could, they rode.
And when they reached the palace of the prince
They charged the men at the gate
At once to announce to the prince
That Dasaratha's men had come
And desired to be seen.

"Prince, men have come from the King, your father
 Bearing a message for you", they said.
 And up he rose to see them
 For great was his eagerness
 To hear from the King, his father.

"Is he well, the King, my lord?" cried he
 Not waiting for them to speak.

"He's well", said they
 And quieted his anxious heart.

"And is the dear Crown Prince well?"

"Yes", said they and he clasped his hands
 In thankfulness and joy.

And after loving enquiries
 About the rest, the envoys said
 "Here is the royal epistle
 May it please you take it,
 Prince, whose beauty baffles the painters!"

He stood to receive the royal letter
 And first he placed it on his head,
 As if it were holy ashes
 Received at a sacred shrine
 And after, opened it to read.
 Glad he was to be asked
 To go to Ayodhya at once
 For eager was the prince
 To be with noble Rama again.

No time was lost
 To find auspicious hour or day;
 Car and convoy were ordered at once
 His uncle's leave was taken
 And he stood at the car
 Calling for Satrughna
 To hurry up.

Elephants and chariots
 Troops and drums

All noisily gathered to march with the prince
To his native city.

Soft music played to send the prince away
The harmony was sweet to the ear;
And hymns of praise were lustily sung
Wishing the beloved prince
Safe journey and every joy.

Fast they sped seven days and nights,
Crossing hills and rivers
And after, reached Kosala
Famed for rich green fields and over-flowing
channels.

But what was this he saw?
The fields were lone
And no one at the plough,
And young men in the streets
Wore no flowers on their necks,
And Ayodhya's face
Was like a withered lotus.

The flutes of the city were still
And he did not hear the anklet-bells
Of happy dancing maids.
The balconies were empty
And the towers were left
Undecorated, bare.

“The faces I see
Have no laughter in them,
No incense issues from the houses I pass,
The maids I see have no flowers on their heads,
Unlighted are the house lamps.”
“It seems I must prepare”, he thought
“For some heavy news.”

Straight he went to where the King must be
But found him not
“This is strange”, he thought
And his brave big frame now trembled in fear.

Came hurrying a maid who rushed to him and said
“Your mother wants you come at once.”

Mother and son were locked
In joyous embrace.
“Is father well?” she asked,
“The queens and my sisters?”

“Yes, yes”, said the prince
“But tell me where the emperor is;
I long to kiss his lotus feet
I found him not where he must be.”

The hard-hearted queen
Un-perturbed she spoke
“Son, summoned by the gods above
The King your father left us.
Like a conquering hero
He has joined the gods
Grieve not for this!”

Like a javelin sharp, these words
Pierced the prince’s heart
And he fainted and fell.
His beautiful locks spread out
He lay on the ground
Like a tall tree blown down in a sudden storm.

Pale his lips, and his beautiful eyes
Streaming tears, he asked
“What have I heard from you my mother?
Fire cannot burn as your words have burnt!

“O father, how could you leave
Your people thus to grieve?
You destroyed of yore
The enemies of the gods.
Is it they still have foes
Whom to battle with?
Wherefore called they you again
O mighty shouldered warrior?”

Thus did he weep disconsolate
 Like an orphaned child
 And to the loving women around
 He said, "Now let me go
 To dear Rama and kiss his feet
 Who now is father and lord
 To fatherless me."

Whereat his mother compunctionless
 Spoke these cruel words
 "Brave prince, he whom you seek
 To the forest he has gone
 With his wife and brother."

The prince was dazed and utterly confused
 "Well, let me hear", he said
 "What more have you to tell?"
 "Has Rama gone to the forest?
 What was the crime
 For which exile was ordained?
 And how did the angry gods
 Bring it about? Tell me all
 How did the fates contrive?

"He could not have sinned
 Except for some great good.
 Tell me now was it after or before
 My father's death?
 Good mother! Do make things clear for me."

Said Kaikeyi, "My son!
 It was not any deadly sin
 Against guru or violent deed
 Deliberate or accidental,
 Even when the King was alive
 Radiant like the sun himself
 Rama went to live in the forest."

"Was he guiltless?
 Did no enemies seize and carry him?

Did he do no un-intended deed
 To bring this penance about ?
 Then why when father was alive
 Should a prince for penance go?
 And how did the King die?
 Tell me now and keep me
 No longer in suspense.”

“Son, listen now, I obtained from the King
 A boon and made the kingdom yours,
 And got the prince exiled
 To make the kingdom safe for you.
 Grieving for this the Emperor died.”

Bharata’s hands were on his ears
 Not bearing to hear these cruel words;
 His brows quivered, and his breath
 Was like a furnace throwing flames
 And his eyes spouted tears of blood.

Fierce was the prince’s wrath
 Against his evil mother
 But he refrained from violent deed
 For the vision of Rama rose
 Before him sternly disapproving.

But he let go angry words;
 “Your machination foul and wicked
 Has killed my father and consigned
 My noble brother to forest life;
 And you boast to me this double achievement.
 Yet I tear not your wicked mouth
 And do you want me to complete
 This plan abominable
 By eagerly seizing my brother’s crown?”

He lapsed silent, and sunk in thought:
 “No, Dharma is not dead” he cried
 “Dharma has survived wickedness.
 For Ayodhya had a king who died

And a prince his heritage renounced
 That the pledged word may still be honoured;
 And if Bharata be mean enough
 To profit thereby, blame we the times?

No, no, my crime shall be
 My own misfortune
 And not belong to the times
 That produced Rama and my father.”
 He could no longer bear
 To stay by the wicked mother
 And left to find some consolation
 At Queen Kausalya’s blessed feet.

And when he saw the bereaved Queen
 Grief overwhelmed him once again
 He dropped like lead on the ground
 And bathed her feet in tears.

“Mother dear!” he cried
 “Your wretched son craves your blessing.
 Oh where is my father gone?
 And where is my great good brother?
 Am I to face this ruin, alone?
 Unfriended wretch am I indeed.

Could you not hold him back for me?
 Were you all and your combined strength
 Unequal to the power of Death?”
 And like a stricken bird he fluttered
 And rolled on the ground and wept.

“The evil woman that brought this about
 The gods and her sin could have struck her dead.
 But how can I ask for that when this thief
 That is son of her body is not dead but alive—
 Although his death would solve at once
 This chaos and universal grief.

“Heaven’s charioteer that drives
 Darkness out of this world

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Was father to this ancient royal clan
 Came a scion of that house to be born
 Bharata, another name for shame
 O my mother, why was I born?"

Thus wept the prince unrivalled
 In strength of limbs and spotless mind,
 The twice bereaved queen
 For a moment thought her exiled son beloved
 Returned and stood before her.
 She gathered Bharata up
 And pressed him to her anguished bosom.

"Prince among princes
 Bharata my son!" she cried
 "In the long line of your great race
 There was none so noble as you, my son!"
 Moved was she to her depths as she thought
 And thought again of all he had said.

III

Bharata's passion had for the time subsided. And the people and princes and elders, led by the Sage Vasishta, called upon the good prince to accept the crown and undertake the governance of the State. Bharata had no difficulty in convincing the wise men that what they proposed was fundamentally wrong. He proposed a better solution which was acclaimed with universal approbation. Bharata's self-reproach and humility are beautifully brought out by Kamban. Unfortunately, it is not possible to reproduce in a translation the exquisite art of the poet. I must point this out not only in introducing this particular chapter of Kamban but in respect of the whole of my effort in the direction of illustratively presenting Kamban to non-Tamil-knowing people, and indeed in respect of all translations of poetry by the ablest among us from one language to another. Let me quote William Cowper who wrote in one of his beautiful letters: "There are minutae in every language which transferred into another will spoil the version. Such extreme fidelity is in fact unfaithful."

But what is one to do who does not wish to impose on the public and palm off one's own bad composition as a rendering of Kamban? All one can do is to avoid pitfalls and be as faithful as possible where he can do so without damage to the purpose. In another letter the same poet wrote: "There is something in his style that touches me exceedingly and which I do not know how to describe. This property of it which depends perhaps altogether upon the arrangement of his words and the modulation of his sentences, it would be very difficult to preserve in a translation."

Yet another quotation from Cowper dealing with the difficulty of satisfactory translation. "It cost me all the morning yesterday and all the evening to translate a single simile to my mind. The transitions from one member of the subject

to another, though easy and natural in the Greek, turn out often so intolerably awkward in an English version that almost endless labour and no little address are requisite to give them grace and elegance." I must say that I have gone through many occasions of this kind especially where Kamban in the midst of the human narrative suddenly and with exquisite beauty reminds his readers of the fact that Rama was God incarnate.

When the sad people of the City learnt
 That Kaikeyi's son was disconsolate
 They had a consultation hurried
 And a general council was summoned at once
 Of ministers of State and citizen leaders,
 Army captains and provincial chiefs,
 Family priests and bearded elders;
 And round the handsome prince they sat
 Each in his appointed place.

When all were ready the good Sumantra
 Turned to Vasishta who understood.
 Spoke he then to the prince these words :
 "Son of Dasaratha ! your duty is clear,
 The people need a protecting hand,
 And now there can be no other choice.
 The sharp sword and strong hand
 Of the king is like the sun during day
 And the moon and shining stars at night,
 Without which all would be dark and confused.

"Learned and pious elders all,
 Kings and grey-haired men assembled
 Desire that you do take the chair of State
 For due maintenance of law
 And eternal dharma as in the days
 Of your great father gone to Heaven.

"Disintegration awaits the State
 That has no king that rules
 Even like the body bereft of the spirit
 That from within governs.

No society, be it of gods
 Or of the enemies of good,
 No world of any sort or kind
 Can hold without a protecting king.

“And if we look about us well
 Here on earth or in the heavens,
 The unending number of things that move
 Or which seem to move or live,
 Maintained are they all by order and rule.

“The King your father is dead, and Rama
 Eldest born has renounced and gone.
 The mantle has fallen on you unsought
 By the King’s boon your mother had earned.
 This State must needs be ruled, O Prince!
 This is our well-considered counsel;
 It is for you to save the people;
 In you alone, Prince, lies their hope.”

The sage’s words were charged
 With deep emotion, but the prince
 Trembled as one to whom a poison cup
 Was given to drink and die.
 Broad-shouldered brave Bharata’s heart
 Throbbed like a woman’s heart excited.
 Everything swam before his eyes
 But he gathered himself and spoke :

“When the peerless prince my brother
 Dasaratha’s eldest son is living
 You counsel me to wear the crown!
 Revered sires, if this be Dharma,
 As it must be when you say it,
 Then who can blame my mother now ?
 Her deed would stand approved by you.

“Experienced in the affairs of kings,
 Tell me whether in the history of states
 From the earliest days of yore till now,

Was any younger son ever called
To govern the land when the elder was alive ?

"It would be a shame, honoured men,
I cannot do it as you desire :
Go I must to the forest at once,
And bring Rama back from exile
And see him duly installed as King.
Else understand I'm firmly resolved
To spend my years in the forest too;
Or else, reverend sires, I die !"

Whereat there was acclaim
Loud and universal :
"Noble Prince, you need no crown
Nor deeds nor sacrifices religious.
The fourteen worlds may disappear
Your glory shall be
For ever and ever !"

Said Bharata then to his brother there
"Satrughna dear ! Let the trumpet sound
And be it proclaimed that Bharata goes
To bring the King
Home to Ayodhya again!
Let a great army prepare
At once to march with me."

And when the proclamation was made
With tumultuous cheers it was received.
The dead city came to life
And gloom and grief gave place to joy.

Before morn next day the troops were ready,
And the noise was like the roar of the sea.
Kaikeyi's foolish dream was shattered
And nothing remained of it to hope.
And great Ayodhya rejoiced
As if she'd never grieved
But rose from an ugly dream.

The army marched along
Chariots and horses and mighty elephants
But Bharata walked;
“My lord the big brother has shown the way”
Said Bharata, and on foot he went.

IV

Kamban looks upon Rama as God incarnate. The worship is unqualified. But the poet's heart is obviously given away to two other men in the Ramayana, Guha and Bharata. Bharata is Kamban's supreme ideal. And Guha is his paragon of loyalty and I think in that respect he beats Lakshmana. Kamban closely follows Valmiki everywhere with great care and even where in some places with remarkable understanding and skill he deviates, the exception truly proves the rule. But he lets himself go freely with Guha, round whom his great poetic imagination plays with wonderful effect and originality. There must have been a popular long-standing tradition about Guha which Valmiki recognised and wove into his epic, but did not deal with that character as fully as he himself perhaps had intended. But Kamban has done full justice and, so to say, fulfilled Valmiki's intention. In dealing with Guha, the poet thinks and speaks through him. The devotees of Kamban may well look upon Kamban as an incarnation of Guha.

The prince and his army marched
Through country waving with corn
Watered by holy Kaveri,
And reached the forest bank of Ganga.
The prince's plight drew pity
From man and bird and beast
And even from the rooted trees.

Behind the brave and blameless prince
That walked to seek his exiled brother
Marched a huge full-limbed force
And Guha watched from the other bank.
"This must be a force led by Bharata
Against the exiled prince" thought he.

His anger rose and the river-king
 Was a rugged man and fierce when angered;
 He laughed in scorn and his eyes shot fire,
 His nostrils swelled and eye-brows quivered,
 Red were his eyes and sharp his words,
 He bit his lips and buckled his sword.
 He sounded the bugle and shook his *tudi*
 To warn his tribe to look out for battle
 And his big shoulders swelled
 At the scent of war.

Hearing his call, the forest men
 Armed and gathered on the southern bank.
 Huge was the swell of fighting men
 That stood behind Guha ready for war.

"Brave denizens of the forest,
 The wicked host on the bank across
 Let us make a gift of them
 To the gods today and reinstal
 The exiled prince in his rightful place."

"Let us see how they will cross
 This wide river's rolling flood.
 Bowmen brave! will you quake?
 Or will you smash that army there
 Elephants and horses all?

"The honour of our tribe is at stake.
 'Friend' he called me, my brothers,
 And he must see
 His friend is brave and minds not death."

"This wicked prince, disloyal man
 He may not love his elder brother,
 He may not fear the younger tiger prince;
 But dare he come across the border
 When I am here to guard my friend?
 Let us prove today, my brothers,
 Woodmen's shafts can pierce even princes' bodies."

"My lord he gave them
 All the lands and waters that belonged to him.
 Will they deny him
 Even the forest here
 Which to us belongs?
 Down with that army,
 Waving flags and all !
 Rama will come back to his own
 By your courage, my men
 And your well-aimed shafts."

Thus he said to his iron men
 And stood long bow in hand
 High shouldered friend of Rama
 Guha on the river bank across.
 Sumantra on the northern bank
 Saw Guha and knew him well.
 To the prince he ran and said
 "See there gallant Guha
 Lord of the river !

"Numberless boats he commands
 And an immense army of forest men
 Splendid bowmen all
 His name is Guha
 Dearest friend of Rama.
 This man of granite strength
 And loyalty limitless
 Dark and brave of form
 He is waiting on the road
 To give you worthy welcome."

The prince of spotless mind
 Was joyed to hear this said :
 "Is he the friend who did embrace
 My banished brother and solaced him?
 When he did sadly walk in the forest wild?
 Then I must hasten forward
 Before he arrives here
 And tender him my gratitude."

Impatient with love
 Bharata with his brother
 Went to the river bank and stood.
 The forest chieftain saw
 From where he stood afar
 And was amazed !

Down fell the bow from his hand
 As he saw the figure
 Clad in bark like an anchorite,
 With face sorrow-laden
 A sight to melt the stoniest heart,
 Beautiful but pale like the moon
 Riding the day-light sky.*

And Guha said to himself
 "The prince is so like dear Lord Rama,
 And he who stands beside him too
 Is a very likeness of beloved Lakshmana.
 It seems this prince is lamenting
 And has upon him the habit of hermits."

"He salutes Rama
 Turning to where he must be
 Even without seeing him.
 O ! was I not wrong to think
 That any brother of my Rama
 Could ever do a thing so mean?"

He told his men what he thought;
 And asking them to be wary
 He himself took a boat
 And went across to salute the prince.

Bharata stood with palms joined;
 And when Guha bowed obeisance,
 The prince before whom
 The very gods were humble
 He felt at Guha's feet,

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For this was the man who sweet solace gave
To Rama whom his own mother had wronged.

And the forest chieftain
Lifted him up with love
Greater than a father's love
And clasped him to his rugged bosom,
Guha, most worthy of men,
Who has found a place
In the hearts of pious mortals
Through the ages since Rama's time.

Asked Guha,
"Prince of mighty frame,
What is your mission?"
Said Bharata in answer:
"My father that ruled an empire
Deflected the course of ancient custom.
I have come to set that right
And take the King home to the city."

The wild men's chief who heard these words
Burst into tears of joy.
Down he fell on the ground again
And locked Bharata's beautiful feet
In his rough hands and wept.

"The kingdom of the world was yours
Which at your mother's desire
Your father gave to you.
You refused to touch the gift
Avoiding it as an evil thing.
Grief is in your face
Like a great river dammed.
Admirable soul, your greatness is more
Than a thousand Ramas, believe me, prince."

"What is a poor hunter's praise?
Like the Sun who makes pale all other lights,
The glories of your glorious race

You have made into one great glory of yours,
 Mighty-armed mighty-souled
 Prince unrivalled!"

Asked Bharata :

"Guha, dear tell me where
 My brother rested here with you?"
 Said the *Nishada* "Go with me
 I'll take you to the holy spot."
 Bharata saw the stone with the grass thereon spread
 On which the Prince of Ayodhya slept.

Bharata could not bear the sight

And his tears bathed the ground

As he knelt on earth :

"For me was all this suffered by you;
 Roots and half-cooked fruits you ate;
 The grass was your bed, beloved Rama,
 And I do live and the golden crown
 I am told must duly adorn my head
 And wealth and luxury heaped on me!"

"Show me the place where Lakshmana slept",

Asked simple-hearted Bharata again,

Wanting to kiss the holy spot.

And Guha answered, "Beloved prince,

When on the hard stone Rama slept

And Sita too did lay herself

Down on that cruel bed,

Lakshmana could not bear the sight.

His eyes filled with tears

And all night long bow in hand

He stood awake watching around

Lest any wild forest-beast hurt them."

V

The meeting of Rama and Bharata is for the pious Hindu a great chapter in the Ramayana. The Hindu way of life is fixed for ever in this episode such as no painting and no marble can contain. No wonder that this is the scene that figures most prominently in the festivals of Upper India where the Rama legend is, one many say, even more popular and deep-rooted than in the South. This chapter of Kamban has some of his most exquisitely beautiful verses.

In this scene, Ayodhya has her revenge on the forest. The city and the palace are all gathered at Chitrakuta around Rama and the forest is converted into a busy city. This great reunion at Chitrakuta made a turning point in Rama's forest life. After the *Milap*, he could not bear to continue in that happy place to which memories of the reunion got attached, memories of mother, brothers and beloved elders—in fact, the Ayodhya atmosphere. So he leaves Chitrakuta and goes away to the interior of Dandaka where there would be no memory of the past and where the gods had decided to enact the great tragedy.

Bharata reached the hermitage
 Of holy Bharadwaja
 His heart hungering for love
 And his troubled mind for advice:
 The Sage's face it shone benignant
 The picture of Siva himself with the crescent moon
 Quivering in his hermit crown of matted hair.

He blessed the prince from Ayodhya and said
 "Undying glory to you my son,
 The golden crown is yours
 The kingdom awaits your rule.
 Then why this hermit's habit
 And why glue-twisted locks for a crown?"

The poignant words hurt like a stab.
 Indignant rose the prince, his face
 Aflame with the wrath of innocence.
 He gasped for breath; then, "Sire!" said he
 "These your words I've not deserved ;
 Befit they your holy mouth?"

"Forgive me revered father", he said
 "Never can I touch what belongs me not.
 The kingdom is Rama's by ancient rule
 And if he does not rule as he should
 The years may roll but my abode
 Shall surely be the forest here."

The holy men that heard these words,
 Bharadwaja and others with him
 Were beside themselves for joy to see
 The youthful prince by love had achieved
 What sages by penance struggled to attain,
 True *sanyas* and self-command.

Lovingly Bharadwaja led
 The resolute prince to his hermitage.
 And there was a feast that day in the forest
 Served by the gods as the sage desired—
 For angels obey when hermits command—
 To the prince's troops and the citizen crowd.
 Men and women ate and drank
 Till everyone was in a trance
 Transported to another world.

Something is happening, Lakshmana thought,
 And up a steep hill he climbed and saw.
 Bowmen and horses !
 An army was coming !
 Down he leaped and ran to his brother.

"Brother", said he, "an army's on us
 Led by Bharata newly installed,

Foolish pride has made him blind
To your strength and mine, well, well !”

And saying this he rushed to the hut
And returned full panoplied
With bow in hand and quiver strapped
Wanting orders ready for battle
Against the impious usurping brother.

“See you now, my brother !
Alone, shall I defend you against this wretch
Who stands detested here below,
And whom the gods above abhor.
I shall smite him and his power today
And you will rejoice in your little brother ;
Our wrongs shall be avenged today.

“The ground shall be covered with the bodies of men
Horses and elephants shall be dead,
And a red river flow down the woods.
The devils will feast and dance with joy
Over the carcasses I shall make,
And they and the gods together will celebrate
Your restoration to the throne.

“You will see my might today undo
The wrong that was wrought on the world by a king
Whose foolish fondness for a wife
Led this usurping brother to the throne.
In your disconsolate mother’s grief
Kaikeyi found her wicked joy :
Loud shall be her lamentation
Learning the event of the battle today.”

Rama let his brother talk
For he knew his love
And the angry anguish of his heart.
“Lakshmana dear, do I not know
The might of your arm and the power of your bow?

"But listen now, how can you think
A brother in whom flows the blood
Of our long line of honoured kings
Can do a deed so foul as you fear?
Your love for me has warped your judgment.

"Did we not ever find our brother
The embodiment of all that is good
The very image of Dharma itself?
The Vedas could go wrong, not he!
Proud were we of Bharata
Strong-armed but ever just.
Shall we suspect sin in him
Whom we both knew well to be
The axle-tree of righteousness?

"O Lakshmana dear, do not this wrong
The very thought would be a sin.
Bharata comes but to see me sure
Impelled by love and not for greed
As you will see when he arrives."

Thus spoke Rama in kindly tones
And almost then stood before them,
Bharata ; for ordering the army
To stay behind, he had hurried forward.
O the sight! Is it the brother
Or Grief herself in human form?

Emaciated, with tear-flooded eyes,
Distraught, clasped hands raised overhead,
Innocence herself begging forgiveness,
Rama saw this figure of sadness
And gravely turning to Lakshmana said,
"See you the enemy whose army you thought
To smite and utterly destroy?"

Lakshmana was pale with shame and grief.
Down dropped the bow from his hand;
The tears streamed from his eyes.

And Bharata spoke :
 "What have you done my lord and brother?
 Cruel to me and pitiless,
 You left your post of inviolable duty,
 Allowed the rule of ancient custom
 To be deflected from its course."

This stern impeachment done
 His strength did fail
 For now, he saw
 The dear dead father in Rama !
 He fell prostrate and the anguish of his heart
 His eyes poured
 On Rama's lotus feet.

And Rama's tears came then in a flood
 Bathing Bharata's anchorite hair
 Like Ganga entering Siva's head.
 He lifted him up
 And hugged him to his heart.
 Like two gods they stood
 Compassion and Innocence
 Locked in embrace.

Then Rama eyed him up and down
 His hermit clothes and his wasted form :
 He thought many things and thought
 Of those he had left behind.
 Gently he spoke : "My brother,
 How is the King our father?
 I trust his shoulders are as strong as ever?"

Whereat Bharata said :
 "Oh my brother ! Father is dead!
 Death came to him in the shape
 Of the cruel woman that gave me birth.
 In the grief of your parting he languished and died :
 Truth and body he left behind
 And joined the gods to whom he belonged."

At these words that pierced his heart
 Rama reeled like as one
 Once wounded pierced in the wound again.
 He fell and rolled on the ground :
 Yes, even he that was God Himself
 And he wept like a child long and loud.

“O votive lamp, that burnt so long!
 Art thou extinguished now?
 O King that was father to your people,
 Compassion’s stronghold,
 Have you left us for ever?

“Father, art thou gone? then to whom
 Shall we turn for truth’s exemplar,
 O lion among the kings of the world?

“O Battle-worn King!
 By prayers and sacrifices rare . . .
 You found a son, Ah me!
 Who brought you nought
 But grief and death.
 The prince he tells me
 You languished for me and died.
 But here I am holding life
 Precious even when you are gone.

“Gone with you is largesse,
 Gone is honour
 And valour that the gods may envy!
 Gone is even-handed justice,
 Truth unswerving,
 Gone with you is royal sway
 Kindlier than the rays of the moon.”

Thus did Rama lament
 And roll on the ground
 And those around him
 Tried to soothe his grief.

Vasishta spoke: "Know you not, prince
 If men are born they must also die.
 And man's sole companions
 Are what he renounces and his works?
 You should not grieve, you that know."

"Countless are births and countless are deaths
 And in between, vain illusions,
 Attachments born of pain and pleasure.
 Pitiless death makes no distinction.
 When even the yet unborn
 Are claimed by Death in the womb,
 Must you grieve for one who is gone
 Ripe in age after a well-filled life?"

"Dasaratha ruled for long
 And blameless was the rule
 Like spotless chastity;
 It is not meet we grieve:
 The King your father
 Lived full and well.
 Happy is he with the gods.
 As all our people do
 May your beautiful hands, my princes,
 Offer oblations to the dead."

And so the prince of Ayodhya
 Plunged in the river and there standing,
 Thrice out of his hands
 Reverently offered oblations to the dead
 According to ancient custom.

Proceeded they to the hermitage
 And before they reached,
 Came out from the lone hut, Sita.
 And when Bharata saw her,
 The princess from whom great palaces
 Drew greater beauty when she dwelt in them,
 He covered his eyes with his hands
 And fell at her feet weeping.

And Rama tenderly took him up
 And clasping him in embrace,
 He turned to Sita and said
 "Princess, know the King is dead
 He could not bear the anguish
 Of my unfortunate separation
 And Bharata has come to tell us."

She shook at the words
 Her beautiful eyes melted
 Into a flood of tears.
 She dropped to the ground and placed her arm
 On her mother Earth and wept.

Sprightly had been her steps
 As she walked the woods.
 In the forest she lived and laughed
 As in the city palace;
 So far grief lay utterly defeated.
 But when she heard
 The great King was dead
 And Bharata bore the message sad,
 Grief triumphed indeed
 And drowned the beautiful swan.
 She was led to the river and she too did
 Last offices to the departed King.

Then Sumantra arrived
 Who with the rest had stayed behind
 Bringing with him the bereaved queens
 And the trusty charioteer
 Saluted the princes.

At the sight of the Queens
 Burst Rama's grief again.
 "What have you all done with my father?" he cried
 And from his grief-red eyes
 Flowed tears that bathed their feet.
 Thus wept like a child, even He
 From whom issued the Creator himself.

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There was lamentation loud
 And hearts melted like wax in the fire
 As the queens hugged Sita
 To their breasts and cried,
 Struggling for breath
 In their sea of grief.

Then came a great crowd
 For the army arrived
 And all who accompanied.
 They saw their dear prince again,
 And did not know
 Whether it was joy or grief,
 So confused were they.

And the sun then dipped in the western ocean
 For was he not the head of the house
 That mourned for the King that was dead,
 The ancient house that the Lord chose
 For Himself to appear on earth?

* * *

Nobles and holy men
 And captains of the army
 Sat round the prince
 And his brothers three
 When Rama gently spoke
 Assuaging Bharata's anguish :

"Our father the King is dead
 And by his firm command
 The kingdom now is yours.
 Instead of wearing a crown
 Why these habiliments of an anchorite?
 Tell me now."

Then rose Bharata
 Quivering with emotion.
 His reverent hands were clasped
 As he faced his elder brother :

"Pre-eminent custodian of Dharma!
 Was it right for you
 Thus to leave your post of duty?
 Great was the error our father did;
 Infamous the wrong my mother wrought.
 Come back and be installed, my brother!
 And help to wipe out these horrid stains
 Of error and wickedness.
 Deny not, brother, who art father too."

Moved was Rama and he saw
 Full well his spotless brother's anguish of mind.
 "Brave brother, listen. It would be wrong
 For sons to cast the father and mother
 That gave them birth to eternal shame.
 Our duty lies, let us remember,
 In making glorious what they did."

"So, my brother, I am bound to do
 The King's behest; now argue not,
 And these few years, be regent on my behalf
 And rule on my commission."

"Brother dear, it shall be so"
 The spotless prince agreed.
 "But be sure twice seven years hence
 To return and relieve your deputy;
 Failing which O Rama, I swear
 Fire shall right this infamous wrong!
 All purifying fire
 Shall that day bathe your brother
 For whom all this wrong was done."

Rama was overwhelmed with joy
 Bharata's anguish of heart was gone.
 "Brother, so shall it be", said Rama
 Whose greatness was greater
 Than all his wide-repeated praises.

"Fourteen years" said Bharata sobbing,
And grieved that that must be;
"I ask you a blessing brother", he said
"Give me the sandals you are wearing."

And Rama took them off and gave
What hold the power to give
All the good that man may want,
The dust of Rama's feet.

"My crown!" he said as on his head
He placed the precious gift
And tears rolled down his noble face.
Then flat on the ground he fell
In humble salutation,
And he rose with the dust all over;
Like the golden image of a god,
He looked more beautiful than ever.

The city had filled the silent forest
And now it was time to depart.
The mothers sadly returned
And so the women accompanying.
And all the holy men departed;
And the troops marched back
With the city-crowd behind.
And following them,
Sadly went the Sage Vasishta.

As the great crowd cleared
And the forest resumed its peace,
The gods above that had come to watch
Returned to their blessed abode,
But the last to go with lingering steps
Was good Guha the boat-man chief.

